

Fortnightly Sermon

By
JAMES VILA BLAKE

Minister Third Unitarian Church
CHICAGO ILL.

VOLUME 3

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TIME IN RELIGION

I

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I hope to go with you to a hill from which we may have some prospect of the nature of religion. But let me lead thither from a point afar off; and I will trust that the road to the hill will have given us some knowledge and experience whereby the better to understand the prospect from the top when we shall have climbed to it.

I begin the journey, then, by imagining a crowded multitude of people. Conceive of a vast throng of men swaying in waves, pouring around you like waters, and surging in one direction like a stream. Add to your picture the circumstances, the attire, the vehicles, the voices and clamors, the calls, sometimes the dead silences. I have stood

Where throngs of men were sweeping by me, busy
Returning from more business; and women too,
Yea, even girls and boys, all tired, all glad
To be let out into the air from labor.
Voices released, rang loud on every side;
On pavements the crowds rattled, and thronging beasts
Jostled each other to the driver's call
And crack of whip,—sometimes a wrathful scream,—
Though soon engulfed in the great roar that rose,
Like wind and wave commingled on the coast,
Around me. And the sharp, shrill tread of feet
On pavement, multitudinous, came up
To top the roar, shot with sheen gleams of voices.
I heard a distant bell, clanging before,
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I heard a distant bell, clanging before,
Now rolling with the rest, so that all seemed
An instant as if all were bells, different,
But ringing with one thought in many parts,

It was grand, this symphony,
 Of hurrying men and rustling dress of women,
 The boy's halloo, the laugh of girls (what weddings!),
 And prattle of toddling babes, led by their hands,
 The rattling wagons, teamster's shout, dogs barking,
 The clangor of great doors opening and shutting,
 All mingled in one vast reverberation
 Which to my sense was wondrous harmony.

With such a picture in your mind, and multitudes thronging around you, reflect on the vastness of the whole, the insignificance of any one.

That is not a depressing reflection. There is a "blessedness of being little." 'Tis sad to plug up with ourselves a port of the Universe. 'Tis inspiring and full of power so to yield us to the pathetic sight of a vast concourse of people as not even to bethink us how little we are, but to be clothed with the majesty of the vast assembling of men and things. I like often to be lost in a company, in an extensive multitude. I delight then to feel merged and dissolved in humanity. 'Tis a soothing, a baptising, a supporting of me, like being out of sight in the washing of a sea which floats me.

The "blessedness of being little," of feeling ourselves included and involved with many things, from which apart we are naught, but with them partake of vastness,—this lacks not pleasant fables to preach it. For example: An eagle swooping up and down at a great height, cried to a linnet who was perched on a rose-tree, "Poor thing, thou insignificance, thou feeble-plume, thou knowest not the upper air, nor the crag whither no other creature can come, either by flying or by climbing!" "Peace be with you," said the linnet; "for my part I rather would sing on a rose-tree than scream on a crag. And you have no company. I am contained in a great flock. I rather would be a small portion of a great thing than the whole of a smaller thing."

When we are in a vast throng, we feel the power of the people. In them is the hope, the light, the sight, of humanity.

"When the state-house is the hearth,
 When the church is private worth,
 'Then the perfect state is come,
 The republican at home."

Here and there arise voices; but the people is the great voice. Here and there shoot stars of singers; but the people is

the great song. Great captains start up here and there; but the people rule the rulers, and keep the keepers. The men of the highways and byways, they do the acting and the thinking, the loving, the teaching and the praying, in the house, at the fire-side, in the shop, the school, the church. In a crowded assembly we are made to know that it is not the few but the many whom we must acknowledge and reverence; as from a vantage-point where a city is seen, it is not the spires but the houses that make the city.

Will you have another fable, for this truth? From the bowels of the earth some shining jet was taken and a fire builded of it. Said the blue flames that fluttered and rustled over the surface, "Who is appareled like to us? what beauty is like our beauty?" "Be still," said the fire, "you are only the tongues to this burning heart beneath you."

Yet, now, take another view. Behold a great concourse swayed by the power of one man. He melts destinies in his will, he moulds cities in his heart, he shapes states in his judgment, he leads armies with his cunning, he breaks the hearts of senates with his speech. He may be in command and his word issue like law, as Alfred of England was. Or he may be seated in persuasion, and lead by a fiery breath, like Peter the Hermit. But however it be, from throne or desk, in armor or gown, we behold the supremacy and power of one man over many. The vast throng is silent, the vast throng bows; rises the individual, and they obey, and obeying, they adore.

But now, I pray you, look more closely at this power of the individual. Is it not the power of utterance, of putting forth into effect, of bringing to a terse or supple shape a popular faith or form—is it not this which is the power of the one man? The few who lead must speak and serve the thoughts which are seething unspoken in the people. They may chasten, instruct, qualify, inform these thoughts; but they can move no jot, nor effect anything, till the thoughts be present and already burning with a lively fire in the people's heart. Alfred of England—a name to stir the blood—did mighty things and was a very great and good man. Yet he would have been but as a leaf in the wind if he had not been the voice and hand of England's will to drive out the Dane and keep the land for Saxon homes.

So was Peter the Hermit but a flame from the fiery heart of Christendom. This man was a mis-shapen dwarf, who found his way in military service to Palestine and the Holy City, and came back roaring with the flame kindled in him by the suffering of Christian prisoners whom he had seen in the hands of Moslems, and by the power of unbelievers, in the City of Christ. His puny and ungainly body was shrunken still more and emaciated by his ascetic discipline. He was very contemptible as an object. Yet he aroused the north of Europe as by a whirlwind. All Christendom sprang to the Crusades and waged the wars for a hundred years. It was not Peter the Hermit, but Peter the Voice of the Faith, Peter the Utterance of the Common Heart, who did that work. Without that fiery flood on which he stood, he might have been like a fanning hill spouting some tongues of smoke, but not the volcano which he was, pouring floods of fire. His screams would have been as contemptible as his body. So it is, in like manner, in Antony's oration. The shrewd man attempted no argument, as Brutus did, but translated the people to themselves,—

"I am no orator as Brutus is ;
But as you know me all, a plain, blunt man.

* * *

I only speak right on :
I tell you that which you yourselves do know,
Show you sweet Cæsar's wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me."

In such instances, when some voice utters the fervors of the people's heart, men accept it as they take the grandeurs of nature, by kindred spirit. The poet, the leader, is then like to the great forces and splendors of nature, which appeal to us because we are like them. Well has it been said: "We must all have felt, when certain effects in nature, combinations of form and color, have been presented to us, our own idea speaking in intelligent and yet celestial language; when, for instance, the long bars of purple, 'edged with intolerable radiance,' seemed to float in a sea of pale, pure green, when the whole sky seemed to reel with thunder, when the night-wind moaned. It is wonderful how the most common-place men and women, beings who, as you would have thought, had no conception that rose beyond a commercial speculation, or a fashionable entertainment,

are elevated by such scenes; how the slumbering grandeur of their nature wakes and acknowledges kindred with the sky and storm. 'I cannot speak,' they would say, 'the feelings which are in me; I have had emotions, aspirations, thoughts; I cannot put them into words. Look there! listen now to the storm! That is what I meant, only I never could say it out till now.'"

So cry the people to the poet, prophet, bard, to the true king,—“You speak us; you are the voice of us; we know your words, because they were in our hearts before; go onward; we follow; we are yours because you are ours.”

Here let me state in brief just what so far I have said. I have stated—

That when we are encompassed with a multitude, we feel the vastness of the whole and the insignificance of the individual;

That the people do the real acting and thinking and feeling of the world, in home and mart and school;

That nevertheless we often behold great multitudes apparently swayed and moved by one man, or by a few;

That this shows the power and supremacy of the individual, who before seemed so insignificant in the midst of the throng;

That, however, when we look closely at this individual power, it seems in the main to consist in the faculty of utterance;

That the one man, or the few, lead and move the world, because they express what is surging in the common heart.

Now, as time goes on and the present is swallowed into the far past, it is the utterance, the expression, that remains visible and conspicuous. All the vast multitude, the countless many, fade from sense, from memory, from record. It must be so. In history no names, no deeds, no stories, remain of the great body of the people. The multitude makes only one broad and even mark on the page, in which no individual influences appear. But those who have uttered the voice of the many, who have expressed the common heart in song, prophecy, command, they remain visible, and tower above. And the further we get away from any epoch, the less we discern the throngs of men in it, and the more we behold standing forth the eminent few who gave utterance to the songs and flames, the woes and joys and needs, of the people's hearts.

Hence it is very sure that the past will become resolved into instances and figures of solitary grandeur. At its time, every epoch was a vast, stirring, fecund popular life, mighty and affecting, with here and there some towering person held up by the people because he was able to be the utterer of the people's soul. But at a far distance, all this great stir of life settles and levels and is out of sight, and only the towering persons remain visible.

Conceive a pleasant country of fields and villages, in which arises a lofty and craggy mountain. The pretty towns and fields slope to the sea shore, nodding to the ocean with billows of grain and red-roofed homes of love. Over them hang the mountain crags, where eagles perch and lightnings play with thunders. Below, all is plenty and power, growth and peace, beauty and simplicity, seed time and harvest, birth and life, and death, wondrous abundance. Above, all is awe and solitude, caverns and glooms, and the house of storms. You will look up to the mountain and adore; you will look on the smiling valleys and adore too, and there you will choose to dwell. Now sail away over the sea. Soon the low shore will sink. Gone are all the full houses of the people, the fields of their food, the meadows of their cattle, the bells of their churches, their stores and halls, and the green places where they sport. But the mountain rears its lofty height and looms on the vessel, till at last, after long standing alone, it blends with the parallel grandeur of the sky. So loom and stay aloft the bards and leaders who are lifted up among mankind, when the throngs of the people and their dwellings sink below our vision on the coasts of the Past.

Now, as the people get further and further away from the few lofty persons, the towering men, who remain high in view, when at last the people have gone far enough away, and look back on the grand persons from a far distance, a strange and beautiful thing comes to pass. The people begin to clothe the grand characters who remain towering into sight in that far past, with wonder-stories. This the people do under the influence of their religion, which is a force very mighty in human history and life. When the people look back and gaze on those great figures, immense and mysterious in the silver mists of the distant time, they say to one another that such mighty persons were

gods, or messengers of God. Soon the things told of them grow, and are clothed with mystery. Other stories break forth like flowers and springs, all marvelous and full of sacred signs and deeds and divine powers. Soon the great figures are covered and mantled with these marvels, these simple wonderful stories, as if they were in a corona of light, whence rays shoot forth and sparkles are showered on every hand. These stories are the miracles with which all early histories and all religious records and scriptures shine. They are the simple outbreak of the people's religious feeling, when they look back to the grand shapes, the mighty persons, looming up in their far past. These, with wonder and awe, the people cover with their religious feeling, and behold them in the light of a divine presence which they ascribe to them. To that reverent backward gaze, all appears vivid, wonder-working, sacred, mysterious, divine.

In the northern hills of our country there is a mountain ledge overhanging a quiet, small lake lying like a mirror below. The ledge is a mass of bare rocks, jutting one from another, boldly defined against the sky. If you stand close to these crags, they form no figure, agree in no shape. They are but as other rocky juttings, piled one on another and overhanging. But go away from them, and they begin to melt one into another strangely, and to agree in a mysterious combination. At last from a right distance look up at them, and they have become a countenance. A "great stone face," a mighty face, with grand forehead, a powerful nose and firm chin, a vast and perfect profile, forms the top of the mountain cliff, looking over the lake and the valley. No one can look on "the great stone face" unmoved. Its stern majesty, its moral power, is tremendous. Often have I gazed up at it with a reversion to the old wild ages seizing on me, a trembling, a fear, an impulse to fall prostrate and worship. This illustrates what happens among a religious people when they look at the events and persons of their history. When they are near, the leaders, the bards, the great deeds are only common blocks, things familiar, piled together as happened in the transactions of the time. But when the people have traveled far away and looked back, all is changed. Lo, a face! All then seems full of meaning, and everything has purpose; all is personal; the great events and characters draw

together and agree in a divine presence, in a countenance which looks forth and over all—the countenance of God! Thus arises the element of marvel, myths, miracles in religion among early races; and once arisen, it lasts long and holds mightily to the imagination, the awe and fear, the affections of men. So that even yet the old and lovely miracle-stories are taken as veritable facts by almost all the world. But in truth they are the religious dreams and reverence with which the people looked back to the far past, where their great characters had become mysterious and heavenly by the transmuting effect of the distance, which left them looming alone in the divine horizon.

Here, then, we come intelligently on the tendency of religion, during so long ages, to cling to the past and to found on it. This springs from two great causes.

First, religion must rest on individual impulses and inspirations. It springs from the teachers. It arises from bards who sing of creation; from prophets who utter the everlasting verities, and call to the people to come to the hill of the Lord. Then at last the whole past seems to be only these great figures. All else has sunk and vanished. They remain. They loom grandly, ominously. Religion clings about them.

Again, religion rests by nature on the sense of the divine immanence. Religion can have no other source or life. If the power of God be not here and now, there is no religion. Therefore religion must rest in divinity immanent and living with us. By this nature of it, religion first forms the miracles and signs which shine around the far great bards and leaders, and then rejoices in the miracles, and clings about them, as being and showing the very present power and overshadowing of God.

Here come we intelligently, as I have said, to the historical fact that religion always hitherto has clung about the past and turned to it for the proofs, the power and the glory of faith. Here see we plainly the fact, and the nature and reason of it, that the great religions, like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, the Parsee Faith, have founded themselves on an epoch in the far past, on historical events and great persons, to which these religions have looked back with awe and love for their origin, their proofs, their claims, their wonders.

The mental condition which has produced the fine stories

of wonders and signs in all religions, is very childlike, very simple and lovely. It is the spiritual posture of trust, dependence, uplooking,—faith in its most simple and acceptable form. With perfect simplicity and good faith the miraculous stories broke forth, because the people were full of the child's feeling that all things are living, and have a sense, a power. Immediate life, divinity, mystery, might, pressed on them. They beheld and felt the deity on every hand.

Well is it for us if with adult knowledge we have kept the childlike soul. If while we reason about the fire and gather the chemistry of it, we feel also the warmth of it, it is well with us. If with our collections of knowledge, our arrays of explanations, our maps of heaven and earth, we lose not the sense of mystery and of the holy deeps of nature, it is well with us. Nay, if our study, our research, our balances, beakers, alembics and scalpels, lead us to a deeper and holier awe, a mystery more vast and beautiful, as surely these implements should do, it is well with us. If, however we divide, analyze and handle what nature has crystallized, we feel bathed in life and can see naught but life around us, and hear only life, immediate life, wondrous and holy presence, awful and beautiful presence, severe and loving presence, it is well with us. If we go our way cheerfully like children, glad in a simple feeling of the wonders and beauties of earth and of men, taking them vividly and like sweet gifts, singing songs and saying prayers, it is well with us. It is then very well with us. Peace, joy, strength, exuberance, reverence, greatness, are with us. Before the child can come to full manhood, the man must come again to his childhood, or happily never have lost it. Then "mind and soul, according well, make music as before,—but vaster."

